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2010 Census: Final Mail Participation Rates: Thank You, America!

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Today we'd like to thank the public for our first major achievement in the 2010 Census – a participation rate that matches that achieved in 2000. Our mail participation rate stands at 72 percent, and as I will explain later in this news conference, this is actually in some respects an improvement over 2000.

Given the hard economic times, with high rates of unemployment and foreclosure, as well as widespread discontent with government, this achievement puts us on track to what we hope will be America's best census ever.

In our last news conference, I announced the launch of our April 10 "March to the Mailbox" Campaign to encourage people (especially those living in 6,000 hard-to-count census tracts) to mail back the questionnaire. Judging from the surge in response over the past two weeks, we believe America heard the message and responded.

But before I address the significance of this achievement, I'd like to begin by giving you a short summary of the overall 2010 Census operations, as we customarily do in these briefings.

I am pleased to say again, as I did last time, that our operations are on schedule and at or under budget. At this point, we are well within our projected lifecycle costs for the entire census operation.

ENUMERATION AND DATA CAPTURE – ON SCHEDULE

Many census field operations are completed. Our data capture centers are now busy processing the questionnaires obtained in the enumeration of people living in shelters or on the street and in

transitory locations such as campgrounds and motels, as well as the millions of questionnaires mailed back.

Our questionnaire assistance centers and Be Counted centers have closed; our telephone assistance centers continue to take calls, but fewer than we anticipated.

You'll recall last time I told you that we were making an additional mail delivery of about 2 million questionnaires to households added from various sources. These mailings are complete.

Three other major field operations are on track:

Update/Enumerate (March 22-May 29). In the Update/Enumerate operation, census takers visit very remote areas and count people at their residence, along with updating addresses and maps. Areas included are remote parts of Maine and Alaska, some American Indian Areas, seasonal housing and the colonias on the United States-Mexico border. Using this method, we are enumerating people in about 1.4 million units.

We have completed over 40 percent of the interviews, well ahead of schedule. In the colonias, we have extended the Road Tour so that we could further reach out to the population there about the need to be counted.

Group Quarters (April 1-May 21). Our group quarters operation is in high gear. This is how we enumerate people living in facilities such as nursing homes, prisons, college dorms, barracks, etc. This operation lasts into May and contacts people in about 270,000 locations. At present, GQ enumeration is 61 percent complete and on schedule.

Coverage Follow-Up (April 11 – August 13). On April 11, our call centers began calling respondents who mailed back a form that had an apparent error in the household count or where there was a household with more than six people.

These calls are simply to clarify answers and to make sure we count everyone once, only once and in the right place.

This operation is on course.

Data Capture. More than 89 million forms have been checked in at the three data capture centers and more than 72 million have been scanned. About 61 million forms have completed data capture and been transmitted to headquarters.

RECRUITMENT AND HIRING – EXCEEDING GOALS

Nationally, our 2010 Census recruitment effort has been successful. We have met our goal of recruiting 3.8 million applicants so we are on schedule.

I can assure you everyone hired goes through the FBI background and fingerprint check. We place the greatest value on the safety of the American public and our staff.

PREPARATIONS FOR DOOR-TO-DOOR ENUMERATION (NRFU)

This Saturday we kick off our door-to-door enumeration of households for which we have not received a questionnaire. We intend to highlight this operation in a follow-up press briefing next Monday (May 3), but I'll say a few words about it today.

We call this operation Non-Response Follow-Up (NRFU), and it will take place between May 1 and July 10.

In this operation, census takers receive a series of assignment areas of about 40 cases each. They visit each address, verify it, interview the respondents and take down the answers on the census questionnaire. They also complete questionnaires for addresses that they happen to find that are not on our list.

This week the 494 local census offices are printing the address lists of households we will be visiting in the Non-Response Follow-Up operation.

This process also includes the removal of late mail responses as close to the beginning of the operation as possible, thus allowing us to minimize the number of personal visits we have to make out in the field. The final removal of late mail return addresses takes place in the local census office, so the census takers have as current a list as possible.

We have already trained thousands of field operations supervisors and crew leaders and this week the crew leaders are conducting training for the first wave of census takers who will go door to door in May and June. In all, more than 400,000 census takers are in training this week.

I know you have many questions about this operation; be sure to come to next Monday's press conference, and we will brief you in detail.

HALFTIME SCORE: 72 PERCENT

That's where we stand on operations. Now I'd like to get to the big news today.

In a sense, we are at halftime today in the process of counting every American. The first half was all about getting people to mail back their completed questionnaire and better than 7 in 10 households did that. This is the "easy" part of the census – the part that is least costly and least labor-intensive.

The second half is all about going door to door and getting people to give their answers to a census worker.

I want to dispel any notion that the census is over. We have many miles to travel and several months to go before we wrap up data collection. And yet I think it's worth pausing to consider what has been accomplished so far.

In reaching 72 percent, we have successfully surmounted the first hurdle in the enumeration process. This is a great national achievement – one that will reduce the need for census takers to go door to door – and save considerable taxpayer dollars.

Beating the mail response rate achieved in 2000, when we reversed a three-decade decline, was a formidable goal, and America has met the challenge and equaled the 2000 performance – which was, by most accounts, a very successful census.

We are pleased that 28 states equaled or exceeded their 2000 rate, including several large states: Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania and Texas. In addition, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico exceeded their 2000 rate. Another 11 states are within one percentage point of their 2000 rate.

North Carolina and South Carolina each exceeded its 2000 rate by 8 percentage points, a notable achievement.

Thousands of local jurisdictions have matched or exceeded their 2000 participation rate – in some cases, by a considerable amount. As the tables in your press kits show, 7 of the 10 most populous counties equaled or surpassed their 2000 rate, and 8 of the 10 most populous cities did likewise.

Many factors were responsible for this strong mailback response. We believe the replacement questionnaire, additional advertising and our “March to the Mailbox” Campaign converged in time to give us a significant bump.

On Saturday, April 10, people were receiving the replacement questionnaires just as we ramped up our advertising, especially via radio, and just as more than 20,000 partnership organizations engaged more than 250,000 volunteers across the country in events designed to alert the public that there was still time to respond.

We believe the strong response vindicates our use of the multiple contact strategy as it did in 2000. In this census, for the first time, we sent 25 million replacement forms to addresses in areas historically having low mail response rates. We mailed another 10 million replacement forms targeted only to non-responding households.

We believe these mailings increased the mail participation rate by more than 2 percentage points. Since each percentage point increase in mail response means a savings of \$85 million dollars, this alone reduced the cost of follow-up by about \$170 million dollars.

In addition, we found that the replacement form had a significant impact in reducing variations in response for groups that tend to be hard to count – those, for example, living in rental households or multi-unit buildings, those in poverty and those without a high school degree.

[Note: See charts.]

COMPARING 2010 WITH 2000

The question you are all dying to ask: Did we equal our performance in 2000?

We believe that counting America is a bit more difficult this time around. We are bigger by some 30 million people.

This meant we had to process more forms.

[Note: In Census 2010, our participation rate universe is 116.1 million with 72 percent of the universe being 83.6 million. In 2000, the universe was 89.7 million with 72 percent of the universe being 64.6 million. Therefore, we had to process 19.0 million (18,984,183) more forms in the 2010 Census to achieve a 72 percent participation rate.]

We're more diverse, and more of us are not native English speakers. Perhaps you saw the report we released yesterday on language diversity. It showed that the number of people over 5 who spoke a language other than English more than doubled over the past three decades.

[Note: Percent of U.S. population speaking a language other than English at home. 2000 = 17.9 percent. 2009 = 19.7 percent.]

More of us are facing economic dislocation from our homes. In addition, response rates to surveys in this country and around the world have been declining.

Furthermore, drawing a comparison between the two censuses is complicated because there are significant differences in the way the two censuses were conducted. The 2010 Census uses a short form exclusively (10 questions), whereas in 2000, one out of six households received a long form (over 50 questions).

We determined the universe of households to be included in the Non-Response Follow-Up operation on April 18, 2000, for the 2000 Census, we planned on doing this on April 26, 2010, for the 2010 Census.

At the start of Non-Response Follow-Up, the actual mail participation rate was 69 percent for Census 2000. Short-form response was 72 percent, but when you factor in the significantly lower response to the long form, the overall rate is lower.

That's why I said at the onset today that, in some respects, 2010 is an improvement, especially given the scale of the census.

In choosing to set a goal for 2010, we decided to use the 2000 short-form response rate – so that we would be comparing apples and apples.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: DIDN'T GET A FORM? NO PROBLEM, YOU WILL BE COUNTED

The complaint we hear most from the public is that they didn't receive a form – this illustrates how determined people are to be counted.

People who did not get a form are concerned. Let me point out that there are number of reasons you might not have gotten a form. You might live in one of those areas where census takers are counting people at their homes. You might have a PO box. You might live in a newly built home that didn't get into our address list.

But let me stress again that the census is not over. We are at halftime.

We will count you. We still have a long way to go and many more of the nation's households to count. America, if you did not mail back a form, you get a second chance. We will count you when our census takers come to call.

You still have time to participate in the process. But you must open the door and provide answers about all the people residing in the home as of April 1.

Where possible, we are hiring people from your community as census takers – people who speak your language and understand your concerns about privacy and safety.

Although the official start date is Saturday, census takers will start early. As part of their training, they will go out and conduct their first enumerations. You'll know them because they will have a badge and a black shoulder bag like this.

I will describe the operation in more detail at our next operational press briefing on May 3, but for now let me urge people to be on the lookout for our workers.

CONCLUSION: KICKOFF FOR SECOND HALF

Is 2010 a good census? So far, so good – but we have a long way to go before we know for sure. The second half kickoff for the 2010 Census is about to take place.

We still need key people in the community – our more than 200,000 partners and our more than 10,000 Complete Count Committees – to maintain their efforts.

Most of all, we need the public to cooperate with our census takers.

I have participated in countless events to promote the census. In these cases and in the thousands of "March to the Mailbox" events held all over the country, I was impressed at the zeal and determination of the volunteers.

As I read the news accounts of these events, I was particularly struck by the comment of one participant: she said, “If you don’t fill out the questionnaire, it’s like you’re declaring yourself invisible.”

When our census takers come to call, please make yourself visible.

When we deliver the nation’s population totals to the President next December, I want to be sure we include you, your family and all of your neighbors in the counts.